DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 088 837 SP 007 808

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TITLE An Effective Parent Paraprofessional.
PUB DATE [73]
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change; *Behavior Problems; *Classroom Observation Techniques; Elementary School Students; Nonprofessional Personnel; Operant Conditioning; *Paraprofessional School Personnel; Parent Student Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Skill Development

ABSTRACT

A study designed to modify inappropriate pupil behavior in a recently integrated public elementary school in New Orleans made extensive use of a parent paraprofessional. It was conducted in a classroom judged by the faculty to be experiencing numerous behavior problems. The parent paraprofessional was given written definitions of the behaviors she was to observe and then observed the class daily during baseline, experimental and follow-up periods. In the experimental period the teacher reinforced pupils exhibiting satisfactory behavior and ignored, as much as possible, those behaving inappropriately. The paraprofessional copied letters drafted by the teacher to be sent to the parents of pupils, informing them that their children were behaving well in class. It was expected that the parents would further reinforce their children when they received such favorable letters from their child's teacher. Agressive and disruptive behaviors were both reduced during the experimental period. During the follow-up period, the number of agressive behaviors and disruptions were found to have increased slightly over the experimental period, but they remained well below their previous levels. The paraprofessional was found to be of increased value in the over-all school program after learning the mechanics of taking part in a relevant research study. (DDO)

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AN EFFECTIVE PARENT PARAPROFESSIONAL

ED 088837

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Though innovations in education are mounting and an unprecedented portion of our gross national product is being spent on education, there is a widespread feeling that education is still dismally short of our hopes and expectations.

As a result of discontentment on the part of the public schools constituents, one of the guidelines for receiving Federally Funded categorical aid under Title-1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires parental involvement with the schools.[1] In an attempt to facilitate this involvement, the New Orleans Public School System hired one parent of Title-1 pupils from each participating Title-1 School. The duties of these paraprofessionals (Community Liason Workers), hereafter called CLW, who worked directly under the building principal, included a full range of activities from involving the local Title-1 parents in activities of their particular school to supervising recreation and lunch room activities to providing first hand assistance to students within the classrooms.

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One CLW was assigned the task of contacting the parents of children cited for disciplinary problems. The teachers justified this assignment on the basis of their having had provious difficulty contacting these parents. Many of the homes were without telephone service and in some instances the parent worked long or unusual hours. The CLW's visits to the homes were somewhat helpful but proved burdensome because most of her visits were after normal working hours. Therefore, alternative solutions were sought.

One alternate plan for assisting the teachers with behavior problems involved a study designed to modify the inappropriate behavior of the pupils. The CLW was given training necessary that she could perform a major portion of the tasks involved in the study. As a part of her training, she recorded the instances of inappropriate behavior in time intervals. It should be noted that recording behavior in time intervals is necessary to establish an interpretation of the pattern in which the behavior is occuring.[2] Additionally, she copied letters to be sent to the parents of the pupils which had been drafted by the teacher. It was

theorized that social approval for appropriate behavior and ignoring inappropriate behavior would improve the behavior of the students involved.[3] It was further theorized that a combination of the parents and the teacher operating jointly as contigency managers would be more effective than operating separately.

The procedure in this study consisted of the teacher reinforcing the students when they exibited appropriate classroom behavior and ignoring them when they exhibited inappropriate behavior, providing the inappropriate behavior was not harmful to anyone. The second independent variable consisted of sending a complimentary letter to the parents of the pupils informing them that their children were exhibiting desirable behavior. It was expected that the parents would further reinforce their children and consequently the pupils would continually improve in classroom decorum. The letters which were sent to the parents further served to make contact with the parents who were difficult to reach. This method of sending letters to parents could be used to answer criticisms suggesting the difficulty of reach-

ing parents.[4] The behaviors the teachers referred to as inappropriate and disruptive were specifically defined. This phase of the study was extremely important because in addition to the clarity to which a specific behavior could be referred to, it was essential that the CLW be completely cognizant of the behaviors she was to observe in order for her observations to be meaningful and valid.

Definitions of the varied behaviors and the recording procedure were discussed with the CLW. Thereafter, as a part of her training, she was required to record the behaviors in question, in a classroom other than the class in which the actual study would take place. In an attempt to determine the level of reliability, checks were made by a different person recording the instances of inappropriate behaviors within the same class. After several reliability checks ranged above the ninety percent level, it was concluded that the CLW was sufficiently trained to proceed with her assignment.

The study was conducted within the classroom judged by the faculty to be

experiencing numerous behavioral problems. The specific aggressive behaviors were; bullying, striking, shoving, pinching, slapping, sticking with objects, throwing objects at another person, poking with objects, attempts to strike, biting and pulling hair. The specific disruptive acts were: (1) carrying on a conversation with other children when it was not permitted. (2) answering the teacher without raising hand or being recognized. (3) making comments or calling out remarks when no question was asked. (4) calling teacher's name to get attention, crying, screaming, singing, whistling and coughing or blowing loudly.

When the teacher observed the students behaving satisfactorily he would reinforce them with verbal approval and send letters to the parents informing them of the satisfactory behavior. It was expected that the parents would further reinforce their children when they received such a favorable letter from their child's teacher.

When the study actually began, the CLW was instructed to record the frequencies of occurrence of inappropriate behavior prior to the time the teacher began re-

inforcing the pupils for exhibiting appropriate behavior and ignoring them when they behaved inappropriately. This phase of the study lasted for one week and was referred to as baseline.

The CLW was given written definitions of the behaviors she was to observe, a pair of dark shades, a stop watch and a board size 16" by 11". The definitions for the response codes were memorized and she familiarized herself with the recording sheets and the stop watch.

As a safety precaution against forgetting the definitions, a typed copy of the definitions of the behaviors to be observed was attached to the board. Interrate reliabilities were calculated by a per cent agreement method in which the number of agreements were divided by the total number of time intervals. Agreements were defined as two observers coding the same consequence and agent events under the appropriate behavior category in the given time interval. Two separate observation sessions were held in the baseline period. Two were held in the experimental period and two were

held in the follow-up period

Procedure

During the baseline phase the CLW entered the classroom and recorded the behaviors from 9:30 A.M. until 10:00 A.M. each day. The Classroom teacher was informed in advance, to maintain his normal teaching procedure. The CLW sat in the rear of the classroom wearing dark shades, recording the behavior and abstaining from interacting with the pupils during each of the thirty minute observation periods.

At the end of the five day baseline observation period, a meeting was held after school with the CLW and the teacher of the classroom in which the study was held. At this time the teacher was instructed to begin reinforcing the pupils for exhibiting appropriate behavior and ignoring them as much as possible for inappropriate behavior. The reinforcement was in the form of variable social approval and the pupils were informed that a letter would be sent to their parents attesting to their appropriate behavior.

The teacher was instructed to catch the pupils exhibiting satisfactory behavior and reinforce them with social approval

and send a complimentary letter to the pupils parent. Most research studies show that operant conditioning is more effective than classical conditioning where the stimulus precedes the response.[4] This study utilized operant conditioning which operates on the premise that social reinforces made to occur following the behaviors are to be strengthened and all reinforcement is withdrawn from the behaviors to be weakened.[5]

RESULTS

As shown in figure 1, data from the five day baseline period shows a frequency or 4 aggressive behaviors per observation period. The experimental phase shows a slight decrease in the frequency of aggressive behaviors, (2.6 per period). The follow-up 5 day period which was recorded six weeks after the experimental period ended, showed 2.9 aggressive behaviors per observation period.

The baseline period in figure 2 shows an average of 37 disruptions per observation period. The experimental period for the disruptive behavior depicts a decrease in the frequency of disruption from an average of 37 instances in baseline to 12 in

the ten day experimental period. The 5 day follow-up period recorded six weeks after the experimental period ended shows an average of 15 disruptions per observation period.

Discussion

Paraprofessionals can be of significant value to an over-all school program. In addition to the regular duties of working with the parents of the pupils in the Title 1 school, the CLW has not only learned the mechanics of taking part in a relevant study but has also developed an appreciation for the acquired skill and knowledge.

The school in which the study took place is in the process of making available the services of the trained CLW to the school system's Title-1 office which services some twenty-five Title-1 schools. Hopefully, she can assist in affecting desirable change in the behaviors of pupils in other schools.

Considering the expense of most research studies, this study was relatively inexpensive. The only expense other than the CLW's salary was the stamps and envelopes used to send letters to the parents during the experimental period ofthe

Aggressive Behavior

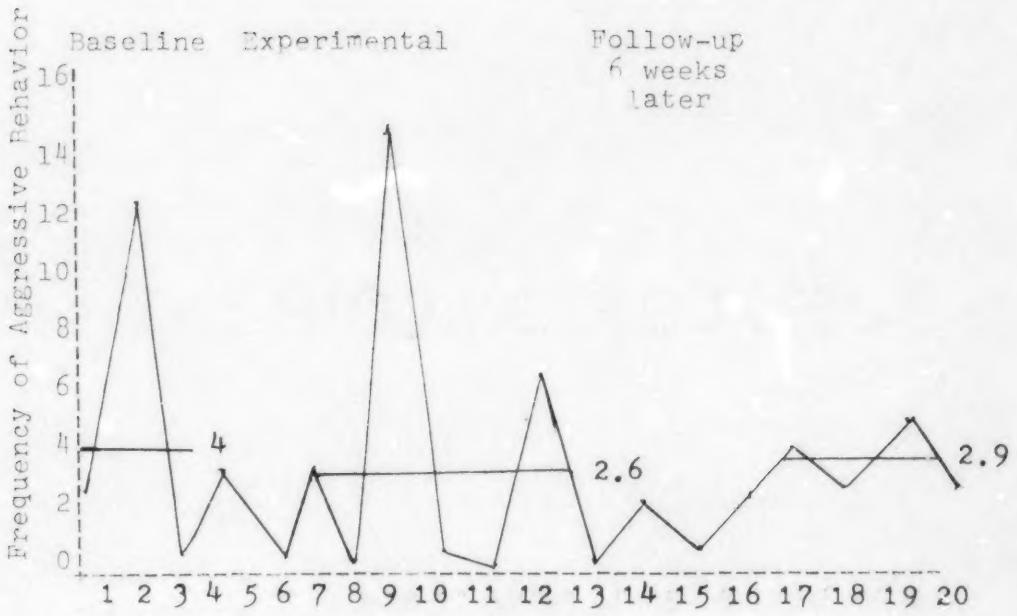

Figure 1

Disruptive Behavior

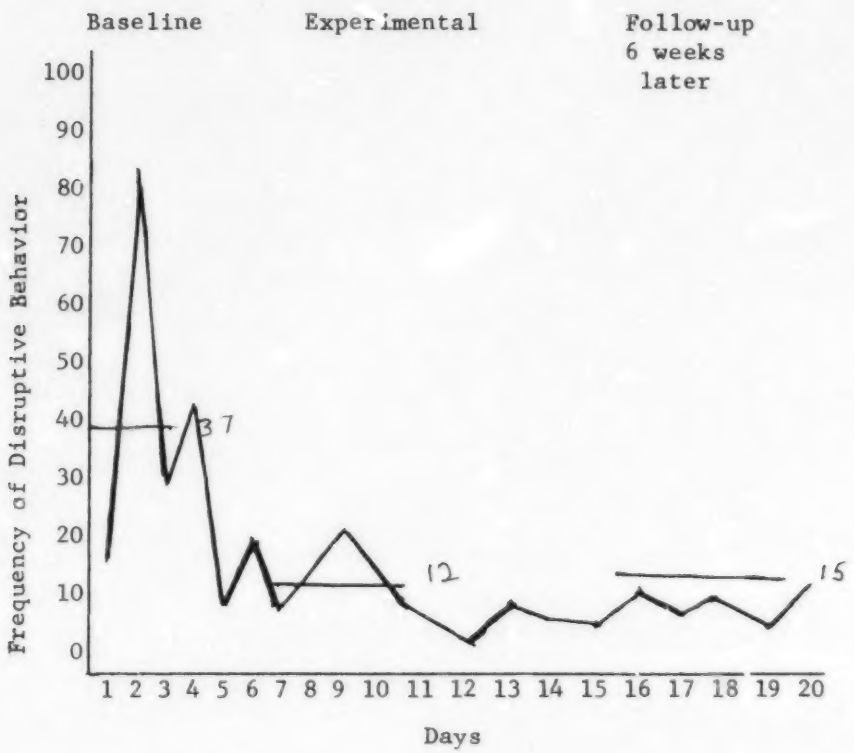

Figure 2

study.

Teachers, nationwide, could improve deviant pupil behavior with individual letters to parents and guardians providing there existed a postage rate more reasonable than that which presently exists. In fact moral support is being solicited from all readers of this article in an attempt to get favorable legislation which will permit all teachers to send letters to parents of pupils at a rate commensurate with our existing commercial rate.

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About the Author

The author, Cleveland J. Harris, has served as an elementary school teacher in New Orleans, La. and in Los Angeles, Calif. He has served as principal of elementary schools in New Orleans La. Presently he is a full time doctoral student in educational administration and graduate assistant at Louisiana State university in New Orleans, La.